



Scripture Study Course 2013 – Part 2

Daily Study – Readings and Meditations

Week 2

Hearing God's Word and Interpreting Scripture Spiritually

- Morning Meditations (20-30 minutes daily): prepared by Don Schwager
 - Hearing God's Word and Being Taught by the Spirit – Isaiah 50:4-5 and John 14:25-26 and 16:13
 - Jesus Opens the Scriptures for Us – Luke 24:13-27,32
 - Storing Up God's Word in My Heart – Psalm 119:9-18
 - The Sword of the Spirit – A Living and Active Word of God – Hebrews 4:12 and Ephesians 6:17
 - The Inexhaustible Treasure of God's Word – Matthew 13:44,52-53 and Psalm 1:1-6
- Readings for study (20-30 minutes daily):
 - "Speak, Lord, your servant is listening," by Don Schwager
 - Formational Reading versus Informational Reading of Scripture, by Don Schwager
 - Instruction in Daily Scripture Meditation, by Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1936)
 - Not Letting Commentators Silence Scripture, by Soren Kierkegaard
 - Approaching Scripture with Wrong Questions or a Wrong Point of View, by J.I. Packer
 - God's word is an inexhaustible spring of life, by Ephraem of Edessa
 - A Guide to Discovering the Spiritual Meaning of the Scriptures, by Origen

Hearing God's Word and Being Taught by the Spirit

Isaiah 50:4b-5 (ESV translation)

A disciple's ear

^{Isaiah 4b} Morning by morning he awakens; he awakens my ear to hear as those who are taught. ⁵ The Lord GOD has opened my ear, and I was not rebellious; I turned not backward.

Some questions for reflection

1. What do you think the prophet Isaiah meant when he said, *the Lord GOD opens my ear to hear as those who are taught* (Isaiah 50:4-5)?
2. When you read the Scriptures do you expect to hear the Lord speak to you through his word in the Bible?
3. What is a *rebellious* ear or a *backward* disciple of God's word (Isaiah 50:5b)? The word *disciple* literally means a *learner* or *one who is taught*. Do I approach the word of God in Scripture as a disciple who is ready to be taught?

The Role of the Holy Spirit – Teacher of Scripture

John 14:25-26 and 16:13 (ESV translation)

“The Holy Spirit will teach you all things”

^{John 14:25} “These things I have spoken to you while I am still with you. ²⁶ But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you.

^{John 16:13} When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth, for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come.

Some questions for reflection

1. What do you think Jesus means when he says the Holy Spirit will teach you all things? (John 14:26)? What things is he referring to here?
2. When I read the word of God in Scripture, do I expect the Holy Spirit to guide and teach me (John 16:13)? Do I believe the promise of Jesus that the Holy Spirit will teach me everything I need to know about God's word and his will for my life (John 14:25)?
3. If I don't experience the Holy Spirit helping me in my daily reading of Scripture, what obstacle might be blocking me? Maybe distractions, wandering thoughts, anxiety, preoccupation with something else? How can I ask the Holy Spirit to help me put these aside and grow in freedom and discipline so I can be more attentive to his teaching and help?



“Speak, Lord, your servant is listening”

(1 Samuel 3:9,10)

by Don Schwager

Who is listening?

In every age and in every place the Lord is ready to speak to young and old alike – to those who allow him to open their ears to his voice and their hearts to his message. We see two great examples in the Old Testament – the young boy Samuel and the older prophet Elijah.



In the first book of Samuel, chapter 3, we read the story of the boy Samuel who lived with the prophet Eli in the temple at Shiloh. Three times Samuel heard a voice calling out his name, “Samuel, Samuel,” as he lay sleeping in the temple precincts. Samuel was sure that Eli had called him. But Eli discerned finally that the voice was the Lord himself who wished to speak with Samuel. Eli counseled Samuel to answer, “Speak, Lord, your servant is listening” (1 Samuel 3:9). From that day forward Samuel’s ears were opened to the voice of God and he grew in his ability to hear and obey the word of the Lord.

Elijah, one of the greatest of the Old Testament prophets, was very zealous for the Lord. He spoke the word of God courageously in the face of stiff opposition and persecution. He confronted the false gods who were corrupting his people, and he slew the priests of Baal and destroyed their altar on Mount Carmel (1 Kings 18). But his courage failed him when Queen Jezebel threatened to kill him. In despair Elijah fled for his life and journeyed for 40 days in the wilderness until he reached Horeb the mount of God, also known as Mount Sinai, where God had spoken with Moses and made a covenant with Israel. 1 Kings 19 describes how God made his presence known to Elijah at Mount Horeb, in “a still small voice.”



The Lord said to Elijah: “Go forth, and stand upon the mount before the LORD.” And behold, the LORD passed by, and a great and strong wind rent the mountains, and broke in pieces the rocks before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire; and after the fire a still small voice. And when Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. And behold, there came a voice to him, and said, “What are you doing here, Elijah?” He said, “I have been very jealous for the LORD, the God of hosts; for the people of Israel have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and slain your prophets with the sword; and I, even I only, am left; and they seek my life, to take it away” (1 Kings 19:11-14).

Listening well to the voice of the Lord doesn't come easily to most of us. We often hear the word of the Lord in the reading of the Scriptures, in the teaching of our elders, and in the wise counsel of our brothers and sisters in the Lord. The Lord also speaks to us when we quiet our hearts and incline our ears to hear his “still small voice” as Elijah did. But our ability to listen well can easily be dulled by noisy distractions and busyness of life. And if we are honest with ourselves, there are times when we don't want to listen. We stop our ears or pretend we didn't hear in the first place.

How often have we heard the complaint, “You're not listening to me.” Parents say it to their children, children to their parents, teachers to their students, couples to one another. And even when people say they are listening, the complaint often goes “You don't understand what I'm saying,” or “That's not what I'm trying to communicate to you,” or some variation of this. Speaking and listening, being heard and being understood, go together.

We listen not only with our ears, but with our hearts and minds. If our heart is not engaged in the conversation or if our mind is closed or distracted, there will be little chance for real interpersonal dialogue and understanding to take place. The Lord wants to open our ears and speak to us, but we have to allow him to teach us how to listen to his voice.

I had to learn this lesson the hard way as I was discerning what course to chart for my life. When I was approaching graduation as a university student, I was pretty confident that I knew what I wanted to do with my life and how I wanted to serve the Lord. I presented my plan to the Lord and expected him to pretty much endorse it. To my surprise the Lord led me to read from the prophet Isaiah, chapter 55. Two verses in particular hit me hard:

“My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, says the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts” (Isaiah 55:10-11).

I wrestled with this passage and with the Lord in prayer for three months. Several times I asked the Lord to give me a passage from Scripture that would guide me in discerning his will for me. Each time I prayed for a passage my eye fell on that same verse from Isaiah – “My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways.” I even bought a brand new Bible with gold painted edges that made the pages stick together and with a new binding that had not yet been creased. When I prayed and opened the new Bible my eyes fell on the same verse from Isaiah 55.

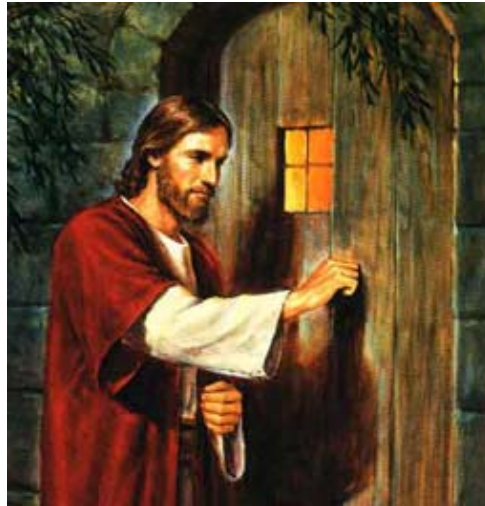
I slowly realized over the course of the summer that the Lord wanted me to put aside my own plans and aspirations so I could be more receptive and ready to hear whatever he wanted to say to me. This lesson also taught me to listen more attentively to those who knew me well, to see what direction they might receive from the Lord for me. With this change of heart it became much easier for me to pray and listen, both to the “still small voice” of the Lord within my heart and to the advice of others who were praying for me. And he did speak. Now forty-two years later, I can confidently say I did indeed hear the voice of the Lord and receive his direction for my life through the counsel of my brothers and sisters in the Lord and through the confirmation of his word in my heart.

Our ability to hear and respond to God with love and trust mirrors our ability to hear our neighbor with love and trust. If we want to grow in listening to God, we also have to learn how to listen to our

neighbor as well. When Mother Teresa accepted the Nobel Peace Prize in Oslo in 1979, she referred to the words John the Evangelist wrote in his First Letter. She said, paraphrasing them,

It is not enough for us to say: “I love God, but I do not love my neighbor.” Saint John says that you are a liar if you say you love God and you don’t love your neighbor (1 John 4:20). How can you love God whom you do not see, if you do not love your neighbor whom you see, whom you touch, with whom you live?

Saint John’s point about love applies to listening as well. “How can we say we hear God whom we do not see or hear audibly, if we do not even listen to our neighbor whom we do see and hear audibly?”



Heart speaks to heart

The Lord wants to speak to each of us from the depth of his heart to the very core of our own. He invites us into an intimate dialogue of love – the love of an eternal Father who yearns for the reciprocal love of his sons and daughters. He is always ready to speak – at any moment, any season, any place – he only waits for us to open the door of our heart to welcome and receive him. In the Book of Revelation, the last book of the Bible, we hear the invitation which the risen Lord Jesus speaks to all his disciples throughout every age. Every day Christ stands at the door of our heart and he longs to enter.

“Behold I stand at the door and knock; if any one hears my voice and *opens the door*, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me” (Revelations 3:21).

In biblical times the invitation to join someone in a meal was considered the most gracious and intimate sign of friendship and communion. When God speaks to us, he treats us as his beloved sons and daughters – he draws us into intimate communion with himself. God made us to know him – not simply to know some things about God – his greatness, glory, and majesty – but to know him personally as our God and eternal Father. That is why he speaks to us – day after day – to communicate his great love and care for us.

Hearing and obeying

Hearing the Lord involves more than simply listening to his word. The Lord wants his word to also form and shape us into the kind of people who please him in the way we think, speak, and act. Tellingly, the biblical words for “hearing” and “listening” are closely connected with “obeying” and “following” the Lord’s instructions.

The word obedience seems out of fashion today, but Scripture presents it as a key part of our relationship with God. Here are two examples.

In the Old Testament the Hebrew word *shama* literally meant “to hear, listen, and obey.” When the Lord made a covenant with his people at Mount Sinai, he said: “If you will *obey my voice* and keep my covenant, you shall be my possession ... a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Exodus 19:5).

The Apostle Peter in his First Letter explains how we have been “sanctified by the Spirit for *obedience* to Jesus Christ” (1 Peter 1:2) who has made us “living stones built into a spiritual temple, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ” (1 Peter 2:5).

We know from experience that hearing and obeying does not come naturally. We have to learn through instruction and example. How can we grow in hearing and obeying the voice of the Lord? The Lord Jesus is our model. When the Father sent him into the world, Jesus had to listen and obey, and to learn what his Father wanted him to say and do. Jesus understood that the prophecy of the suffering servant given to Isaiah applied directly to his mission as the one who would lay down his life as an atoning sacrifice for the sin of the world.

“The Lord God has given me the tongue of those who are taught... Morning by morning he awakens, he awakens my ear to hear as those who are taught. The Lord has opened my ear, and I was not rebellious, I turned not backward.” – Isaiah 50:4-5

When Jesus described to his disciples his relationship with his Father, he emphasized his attentive listening and obeying of his Father’s instructions.

Jesus said, "When you have lifted up the Son of man, then you will know that I am he, and that I do nothing on my own authority but speak thus as the Father taught me. And he who sent me is with me; he has not left me alone, for I always do what is pleasing to him" (John 8:28-29).

Hard hearts and dull ears

What can hold us back from hearing the Lord speak to us? Three big obstacles are indifference, lack of faith, and being preoccupied with other things. They stop our ears and hearts from listening. While Mary sat attentively at Jesus’ feet to hear his words, Martha was preoccupied with an anxious concern to get the meal on the table (Luke 10:38-42). She was too busy to stop and listen – even for a moment.



Shortly after Jesus had miraculously fed 4,000 people with the multiplication of seven loaves (Mark 8:1-9), the apostles anxiously discovered that they had forgotten to bring enough food for their journey across the Sea of Galilee. Jesus chided his disciples for their “hardness of heart” – their inability to hear and understand what he had demonstrated to them about his desire to provide for their needs.

Jesus said to them, "Why do you discuss the fact that you have no bread? Do you not yet perceive or understand? **Are your hearts hardened?** Having eyes do you not see, and **having ears do you not hear?** And do you not remember? When I broke the five loaves for the five thousand, how many baskets full of broken pieces did you take up?" They said to him, "Twelve." "And the seven for the four thousand, how many baskets full of broken pieces did you take up?" And they said to him, "Seven." And he said to them, "**Do you not yet understand?**" (Mark 8:14-21)

What does the Lord mean when he says, “Are your hearts hardened?” Well, it seems from the testimony of Scripture that God’s word cannot take root in us if we allow fear, anxiety, or indifference to take control. We must overcome fear with faith and doubt with trust. If we do not want fear, doubt, or anxiety to rule us, then we need to believe and obey God’s command to us. The psalmist says, “Cast your burden on the LORD, and he will sustain you” (Psalm 55:22). And the Apostle Peter in his first letter takes up the phrase, “Cast all your anxieties on him, for he cares about you” (1 Peter 5:7). A key question we could ask ourselves is, “Whose word do we listen to and trust?” The Lord Jesus invites us to put our trust in him and in his unfailing love.

If we find it difficult to hear the Lord, we do not need to lose hope. The Lord himself will open our ears if we ask. Even when the Lord seems distant at times, he is, in reality, very close. And in this learning process we are in good company. The early disciples were also learning how to hear and believe.



After the Lord Jesus had died on the cross and was laid in the tomb, his disciples lost hope of ever seeing him again. They had forgotten that he had foretold not only his death on the cross but his rising again as well. When Mary Magdalene went to the tomb on Sunday morning to pay her respects to a dead body, she discovered to her surprise an empty tomb (John 20:11-18). But when she saw the risen Lord standing near her and addressing her, she did not at first recognize him. When Jesus called her name, she knew beyond a doubt that it was truly his voice. She ran to tell the apostles that she had seen the Lord and heard him speak to her.

When two other disciples that same day were walking on the road to Emmaus, Jesus appeared to them and began to walk with them as well (Luke 24:13-32). They did not recognize the risen Lord at first, until he had explained the Scriptures to them and sat at table and broke bread with them. Then they exclaimed, “Did not our hearts burn within us while he talked to us on the road, while he opened to us the Scriptures?” (Luke 24:32) The Lord is always ready to receive us and to speak his word to us, to teach us how to listen.

The Lord Jesus stands at our door each day and he knocks. Will you open your heart to his voice and sit for a while and listen as Mary did in her home at Bethany and the two disciples did when they stopped for dinner on the road to Emmaus?

The Lord Jesus Opens the Scriptures for Each of Us

Luke24:13-27,32 (ESV translation)

Jesus opened the Old Testament Scriptures to the disciples at Emmaus

Luke24:13 That very day two of them were going to a village named Emmaus, about seven miles^[a] from Jerusalem, ¹⁴ and they were talking with each other about all these things that had happened. ¹⁵ While they were talking and discussing together, Jesus himself drew near and went with them. ¹⁶ But their eyes were kept from recognizing him. ¹⁷ And he said to them, "What is this conversation that you are holding with each other as you walk?" And they stood still, looking sad. ¹⁸ Then one of them, named Cleopas, answered him, "Are you the only visitor to Jerusalem who does not know the things that have happened there in these days?" ¹⁹ And he said to them, "What things?" And they said to him, "Concerning Jesus of Nazareth, a man who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, ²⁰ and how our chief priests and rulers delivered him up to be condemned to death, and crucified him. ²¹ But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel. Yes, and besides all this, it is now the third day since these things happened. ²² Moreover, some women of our company amazed us. They were at the tomb early in the morning, ²³ and when they did not find his body, they came back saying that they had even seen a vision of angels, who said that he was alive. ²⁴ Some of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said, but him they did not see."

²⁵ And he said to them, "O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! ²⁶ Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?"

²⁷ And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself.

³² They said to each other, "Did not our hearts burn within us while he talked to us on the road, while he opened to us the Scriptures?"

Some questions for reflection

1. Why didn't the disciples recognize the risen Lord Jesus when they met him on the road to Emmaus? Why didn't they remember Jesus' words spoken earlier when he prophesied that the Messiah would have to suffer and die, and then rise on the third day?
2. Why did Jesus call the disciples "foolish ones" and "slow of heart" to believe the word of God spoken through the prophets of the Old Testament?
3. Jesus had to *open the Scriptures* for the disciples before they could believe and understand the meaning of his death and resurrection. How does the Lord want you to "search the Scriptures" to grow in your faith and understanding of who he is and how he has come to save us?
4. St. Augustine of Hippo said, "I believe in order to understand, and I understand the better to believe." His statement echoes the passage from Hebrews: "By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God's command, so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible." (Hebrews 11:3 – NIV) The Lord will "open our eyes" and to give us understanding of his word if we approach with a humble and teachable spirit ready to listen and believe.

The Word of God Is Living and Active – Hebrews 4:12



Formational versus Informational Reading of the Scriptures

edited by Don Schwager

We are being shaped either toward the wholeness of the image of Christ or toward a horribly destructive caricature of that image. This is why Paul urges Christians, “*Whatever* you do, in word or deed, do *everything* in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him” (Colossians 3:17, NRSV, italics added). The Christian’s spiritual journey is a life lived in, through, and for God.

– Dr. M. Robert Mulholland Jr, *Shaped by the Word*

Words have power. They can build up and transform or they can tear down and destroy. Scripture tells us that God created the universe by his all-powerful word. That same word took flesh in Jesus Christ who was sent from the Father to redeem a fallen race: “the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14). His words are words of life because he speaks what the Father has given him (John 8:28). His words not only have power to instruct, but power to heal, restore, and remake us in the image of God.

Paul the Apostle said, “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly” (Colossians 3:16). What does it mean to have Christ’s word dwelling in us?

If you have a favorite author or two, you enjoy reading their literary works. Sometimes you can’t get enough, so you search for everything they wrote, even their letters and biography, because these can often reveal important things about the personal life and thoughts of the author. But the people we know the best are those we live with and share our lives with on a personal, intimate level.

God’s word alive in us

God is the greatest of all authors and the author of life itself. He comes to dwell with us through his Holy Spirit. Jesus said, “If a man loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and

we will come to him and make our home with him” (John 14:23). If we accept his gracious invitation, God literally makes his home with us.

When we read the words of Scripture do we mainly seek wisdom and inspiration for living a better life? A good motive indeed. But God wants his word to not simply improve or reform us. He wants his word to transform our every thought and action.

Transformed by the power of God's Word

Dr. M. Robert Mulholland Jr., a professor of New Testament and Vice President of Asbury Theological Seminary, has written an excellent book on the nature of a formational reading of the Scriptures, [Shaped by the Word: The Power of Scripture in Spiritual Formation](#). He distinguishes between the modern approach of reading biblical texts chiefly to gather information which we then analyze, dissect, and evaluate for ourselves versus a spiritual reading of the Scriptures which allows the Word of God to shape, form, and transform the way we think, discern, and evaluate and make judgments which conform to the mind and character of the God who reveals himself to us in the Scriptures.

The following excerpt from his book helps to explain the difference between informational versus formational reading of the Scriptures.

The formational approach [to reading Scripture] is a radical alternative to our normal orientation to reading and study. Let’s look at some of the balancing characteristics of reading for formation versus reading for information.

First, in contrast to reading for information, the object [of formational reading] is not to cover as much as possible as quickly as possible; reading for formation avoids quantifying the amount of reading in any sort of way. You are concerned with quality of reading, not quantity. You may find yourself in a “holding pattern” on just one sentence or one paragraph or perhaps as much as a whole page, but probably never more than that. You are not concerned with getting through the book. So what if it takes you a year, two years, five years to get through the book? That is not the point. The point is meeting God in the text.

Perhaps there are some things grating inside you right now. You may be saying, “That’s not reading! I’ve got this book; I’ve got to get through it.” Do you ever find yourself thumbing through a book to see how many pages are left in the chapter you are reading? This may be a symptom of informational reading. Or better, you find yourself stopping and going back and reflecting, perhaps dropping back a paragraph or maybe even a whole chapter and saying, “Hey, I missed something here. There are deeper levels of meaning here, and I have to slow down and meditate on them.” This indicates that you may have begun to move into formational reading.

Second, although informational reading is linear, trying to move quickly over the surface of the text, formational reading is in depth. You seek to allow the passage to open to you its deeper dimensions, its multiple layers of meaning. At the same time, you seek to allow the text to probe deeper levels of your being, disclose deeper dimensions of your flawed “word,” disturb the foundations of your false self. Instead of rushing on to the next sentence, paragraph, or chapter, you seek to allow the text to begin to become that intrusion of the Word of God into our life, to address you, to encounter you at deeper levels of your being. If you don’t take time like this with a text, the Word cannot encounter you in it; the Word of God cannot form you through it.

What happens in personal relationships if, as you see people coming toward you, you begin walking toward them talking steadily as you approach, come up to them, shake their hands, and continue on, talking the whole time? Has there been any address from them? This is just what we tend to do with reading material. We pick up the book, and our minds immediately start informing that text. We go all the way through the text telling it what we want it to say to us. When we finish we say, “That was a great book” or “That was a lousy book.” The book has never really had a chance to address you.

Third, in informational reading, we seek to grasp the control, to master the text. I suspect you already see what the third point is in formational reading: It is to allow the text to master you. In reading the Bible, this means we come to the text with an openness to hear, to receive, to respond, to be a servant of the Word rather than a master of the text. Such

openness requires an abandonment of the false self and its habitual temptation to control the text for its own purposes.

Fourth, instead of the text being an object we control and manipulate according to our own insight and purposes, the text becomes the subject of the reading relationship; we are the object that is shaped by the text. With respect to biblical reading, we willingly stand before the text and await its address, ready for the Word to exercise control over the “word” we are. This is one reason formational reading cannot be quantified. It requires waiting before the text. You have to take time with it in order to hear what it says.

[Excerpt from [Shaped by the Word: The Power of Scripture in Spiritual Formation](#), Chapter 5, Copyright © 2000 M. Robert Mulholland Jr, revised edition published in 2000 by Upper Room Books, Nashville, Tennessee. M. Robert Mulholland Jr. is Provost and Vice President of Asbury Theological Seminary in Wilmore, Kentucky, USA.]

Loving God through his Word

Paul the Apostle shows us the way to full maturity as disciples of Christ by allowing our minds to be conformed to God’s word. Spiritual growth involves not only a process of learning God’s wisdom and truth, it also involves a process of unlearning sinful and worldly ways of thinking, evaluating, and acting.

“Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may prove what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect” (Romans 12:2).

If we want to know God’s mind – his thoughts and intentions for our lives – then we must allow his word to not simply inform us but *transform* us as well.

How can we conform our thoughts to Christ’s? A key step is learning how to listen to God as he speaks to us through the words of Scripture. We can approach Scripture in two very different ways – informational reading and formational reading. The following chart (1) compares the two approaches.

INFORMATIONAL READING	FORMATIONAL READING
Seeks to cover as much as possible	Focuses on small portions
A linear process	An in-depth process
Seeks to master the text	Allows the text to master us
The text as an object to use	The text as a subject that shapes us
Analytical, critical, and judgmental approach	Humble, detached, willing, loving approach
Problem-solving mentality	Openness to mystery

In our daily prayer and reflection, we should allow God’s word to form our minds and change the way we think and live as disciples of Christ. Expectant faith and docility open the mind and heart to hear Christ’s voice and to learn from him.

Storing Up God's Word in Our Heart

Psalm 119:9-18 (ESV translation)

A disciple who delights in God's word

- ⁹ How can a young man [person] keep his way pure? By guarding it according to your word.
¹⁰ With my whole heart I seek you; let me not wander from your commandments!
¹¹ **I have stored up your word in my heart, that I might not sin against you.**
¹² Blessed are you, O LORD; teach me your statutes!
¹³ With my lips I declare all the rules of your mouth.
¹⁴ In the way of your testimonies I delight as much as in all riches.
¹⁵ I will meditate on your precepts and fix my eyes on your ways.
¹⁶ I will delight in your statutes; I will not forget your word.
¹⁷ Deal bountifully with your servant, that I may live and keep your word.
¹⁸ Open my eyes, that I may behold wondrous things out of your law.

Some questions for reflection

1. Psalm 119 is a disciple's song of love, praise, and delight in God's word – a word that teaches us how to live according to God's way of truth, righteousness, and holiness. In verse 9 why does the disciple state that he can only *keep his way pure by guarding it according to your (God's) word*. How can I guard my heart, mind, and way according to **God's word**?
2. In verse 10 the disciple seeks God with his **whole** heart and asks for help to *not wander from your commandments!* What is the difference between a whole hearted – versus a weak or half-hearted seeking after God? God instructed Moses to teach the people to *love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength* (Deuteronomy 6:5 and Matthew 22:37).
3. In verse 11 what is the connection between *storing up God's word in my heart* and *not sinning against God*? How can I store up and treasure God's word in my heart?
4. In verse 12, the disciple praises and blesses God by asking him to *teach me your statutes* (God's *precepts* and *commands*). Ask the Lord to instruct you in **all** his ways?
5. In verse 13 the disciples *declares with his lips all the rules of God's mouth* (the Hebrew word for *rules* is also used interchangeably for *God's word*, *command*, and *testimonies*). Why is it necessary to speak out audibly and declare publicly that I will follow God's word (his rules, precepts, testimonies, and commands). Can you think of a passage in the New Testament that states the necessity of confessing out loud with our lips (see Romans 10:9)? Pray out loud your commitment to be a disciple of Jesus Christ and to obey his word with all your heart.
6. God's word is living and active. When you *fix your eyes on his ways* (verse 15) and respond to his word with faith and obedience, he gives you joy and strength (verses 14,16-17).
7. In verse 18 the disciple asks God to *open my eyes* to behold *wondrous things* from God's teaching and commands. When two disciples met Jesus on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24) they didn't recognize him at first nor understand why he had to suffer, die, and rise from the grave for them. Jesus had to *open the Scriptures* for them before they could understand the power of the cross and resurrection (see next meditation). Ask the Lord Jesus to *open all the Scriptures for you* and to increase your faith and understanding through the work of the Holy Spirit in you.

The Word of God Is Living and Active – Hebrews 4:12



Instruction in Daily Scripture Meditation

by Dietrich Bonhoeffer

1. Why do I meditate?

Because I am a Christian. Therefore, every day in which I do not penetrate more deeply into the knowledge of God's Word in Holy Scripture is a lost day for me. I can only move forward with certainty upon the firm ground of the Word of God. And, as a Christian, I learn to know the Holy Scripture in no other way than by hearing the Word preached and by prayerful meditation.

Because I am a preacher of the Word. I cannot expound the Scripture for others if I do not let it speak daily to me. I will misuse the Word in my office as preacher if I do not continue to meditate upon it in prayer. If the Word has become empty for me in my daily administrations, if I no longer experience it, that proves I have not let the Word speak personally to me for a long time. I will offend against my calling if I do not seek each day in prayer the word that my Lord wants to say to me for that day. Ministers of the Word are especially called upon to perform the office of prayer: "But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word" (Acts 6:4). The pastor must pray more than others, and has more to pray about.

Because I need a firm discipline of prayer. We like to pray according to our moods—briefly, at length, or not at all. But that is to be arbitrary. Prayer is not a free-will offering to God; it is an obligatory service, something that he requires. We are not free to engage in it according to our own wishes. Prayer is the first divine service in the day. God requires that we take time for this service. "Early in the morning I cry out to you, for in your word is my trust. My eyes are open in the night watches, that I may meditate upon your promise" (Ps. 119:147-148). "Seven times a day do I praise you, because of your righteous judgments" (Ps. 119:164). God needed time before he came to us in Christ for our salvation. He needs time before he comes into my heart for my salvation.

Because I need help against the ungodly haste and unrest that threaten my work as a pastor. Only from the peace of God's Word can there flow the proper, devoted service of each day.

2. What do I want from my meditation?

We want in any case to rise up from our meditation in a different state from when we sat down. We want to meet Christ in his Word. We turn to the text in our desire to hear what it is that he wants to give us and teach us today through his Word. Meet him first in the day, before you meet other people.

Every morning lay upon him everything that preoccupies you and weighs you down, before new burdens are laid upon you. Ask yourself what still hinders you from following him completely and let him take charge of that, before new hindrances are placed in your way.

His fellowship, his help, his guidance for the day through his Word—that is the goal. Thus you will begin the day freshly strengthened in your faith.

3. How shall I meditate?

There is free meditation and meditation that is bound to Scripture. We advise the latter for the sake of the certainty of our prayers and the discipline of our thoughts. Furthermore, the knowledge of our fellowship with others who are meditating on the same text will make us love such meditation more. In the same way that the word of a person who is dear to me follows me throughout the day, so the Word of Scripture should resonate and work within me ceaselessly. Just as you would not dissect and analyze the word spoken by someone dear to you, but would accept it just as it was said, so you should accept the Word of Scripture and ponder it in your heart as Mary did. That is all. That is meditation. Do not look for new thoughts and interconnections in the text as you would in a sermon! Do not ask how you should tell it to others, but ask what it tells you! Then ponder this word in your heart at length, until it is entirely within you and has taken possession of you.

*Hold on to **one word** for the entire day*

It is not necessary every day to go through the entire text we have chosen for meditation. Often we will hold on to one word of it for the entire day. Passages that we do not understand we can simply pass over. There is no need to take flight into philology. This is not the place for the Greek New Testament, but for the familiar Luther text.

If during meditation our thoughts move to persons who are near to us or to those we are concerned about, then let them linger there. That is a good time to pray for them. Do not pray in general, then, but in particular for the people who are on your mind. Let the Word of Scripture tell you what you ought to pray for them. As a help, we may write down the names of the people we want to remember every day. Our intercessions require their appointed time, too, if we are to be serious about them. Pay attention, though, that our intercessions do not become another means of taking flight from the most important thing: prayer for our own soul's salvation.

Begin with prayer for the Holy Spirit

We begin our meditations with the prayer for the Holy Spirit, asking for proper concentration for ourselves and for all who we know are also meditating. Then we turn to the text. At the close of the meditation we want to be truly able to say a prayer of thanksgiving from a heart that is full...

The time of meditation is in the morning before the beginning of our work. A half-hour is the minimum amount of time that a proper meditation requires. It is, of course, necessary that there be complete quiet, and that we intend to allow nothing to divert us, no matter how important it may seem.

Occasional meditation with two or more people is quite possible in a Christian community, although, sadly, it is seldom practiced. In such meditation there is a narrow way that leads between false, pious talk and idle theological discussion.

4. How do we overcome the problems of meditation?

Whoever seriously undertakes the daily practice of meditation will soon discover great difficulties. Meditation and prayer must be practiced earnestly and for a long time. So the first rule is not to become impatient with yourself. Do not become confused and upset because of your distractedness. Just sit down again every day and wait very patiently. If your thoughts keep wandering, there is no need for you to hold on to them compulsively. There is nothing wrong with letting them roam where they will; but then incorporate in your prayers the place or person to which they have gone. So you will find your way back to your text, and the minutes spent in such diversions will not be lost and will no longer be any cause for worry.

There are many helps for special difficulties that each one may use. Read the same passage again and again, write down your thoughts, learn the verse by heart (indeed, you will memorize any text that has been thoroughly meditated upon). But in all this we soon learn to recognize the danger of fleeing once again from meditation to Bible scholarship or the like. Behind all our uncertainties and needs stands our great need to pray; for all too long many of us have known this need without finding any help or direction. The only help is to faithfully and patiently begin again our earliest exercises of prayer and meditation. We will be further helped by the knowledge that other brothers are also meditating, that at all times the entire holy church in heaven and on earth prays with us. That is a comfort to us in the weakness of our own prayers. And if we really do not know what we ought to pray and completely lose heart about it, we still know that the Holy Spirit prays for us with “groanings which cannot be uttered” (Rom. 8:26).

We dare not allow ourselves to cease from this daily engagement with the Scripture, and we must begin it right away if it is not now our practice. For in doing so we have eternal life.

*[Instructions in Daily Scripture Meditation were first given by Bonhoeffer to a group of seminarians he was training at Finkenwalde, Germany in 1935-36. They were written down by Eberhard Bethge, a seminarian who later became Bonhoeffer's biographer and editor of his collected works. Reprinted in *Meditating on the Word*, by Dietrich Bonhoeffer, edited and translated by David Mcl. Gracie, published by Cowley Publications, 1986.]*

The Sword of the Spirit – A Living and Active Word of God

Hebrews 4:12 (ESV translation)

A living and active word of God

Hebrews 4:12 For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.

Some questions for reflection

1. What do you think the author of the Letter to the Hebrews meant when he said *the word of God* [in Scripture] *is living and active* (Hebrews 4:12)? Is the word of God living and active in my personal life?
2. How is this passage similar to Jesus' words in John's Gospel: *The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life* (John 6:63)?
3. Why do you think this passage from Hebrews uses the image of a *two-edged sword* to describe the word of God?
4. How can the word of God *pierce/reveal* and *discern the thoughts and intentions of the heart*?
5. Can you think of a similar passage that describes God's word as a sword that pierces the soul? When the infant Jesus was first presented in the Temple at Jerusalem, Simeon prophesied to Mary that *a sword will pierce through your own soul also, so that [the secret] thoughts from many hearts may be revealed* (Luke 2:35).
6. Are you ready to let the word of God speak into your personal life and reveal to you the inner thoughts and intentions of your heart? How might that bring deeper healing, freedom, and grace to say *yes* to what God offers you and wants you to do for him?

Ephesians 6:17 (ESV translation)

Wielding the Sword of the Spirit

Ephesians 6:17 Take the sword of the Spirit which is the word of God.

Some questions for reflection

1. Paul the Apostle describes the *sword of the Spirit (which is the Word of God)* as a key part of our protective spiritual armour. How might the Lord want me to wield the *sword of the Spirit* in my personal life today?
2. Am I ready to take up the *sword of the Spirit* in my battle against the world, the flesh, and the devil (1 John 2:15-16; James 4:7)?

The Word of God Is Living and Active – Hebrews 4:12



Do Not Let Commentators Silence the Scriptures

by Soren Kierkegaard

The witty and devout Soren Kierkegaard (a Danish theologian and religious writer who lived between 1813-1855) is sometimes difficult to spot in his "thick" philosophical writings. The following is a condensed excerpt from the chapter "Kill the Commentators!"

Today's mass of Bible interpreters have damaged, more than they have helped, our understanding of the Bible. In reading the scholars, it has become necessary to do as one does at a play where a profusion of spectators and spotlights prevent, as it were, our enjoyment of the play itself, and instead we are treated to little incidents. To see the play, one has to overlook them, if possible, or enter by a way that has not been blocked. The commentator has indeed become a most hazardous meddler. Of course, the commentators are not the only ones at fault. God wants to force each one of us out again into the essential, back to a childlike beginning. But being naked before God in this way, this we do not want at all. We all prefer the commentaries. So with each passing generation we grow more and more spiritless.

The current emphasis on getting back to the Bible has, sadly, created religiosity out of learning and literalistic chicanery – a sheer diversion. Tragically this kind of knowledge has gradually trickled down to the masses so that no one can read the Bible simply anymore. All our Bible learning has become nothing but a fortress of excuses and escapes.

When it comes to existence, to obedience, there is always something else we have to first take care of. We live under the illusion that we must first have the interpretation right or the belief in perfect form before we can begin to live – that is, we never get around to doing what the Word says.

The church has long needed a prophet who in fear and trembling had the courage to forbid people to read the Bible. I am tempted, therefore, to make the following proposal. Let us collect all the Bibles

and bring them out to an open place or up on a mountain and then, while we all kneel, let someone talk to God in this manner: "Take this book back again. We Christians, such as we are, are not fit to involve ourselves with such a thing: it only makes us proud and unhappy. We are not ready for it."

I open the New Testament and read, "If you want to be perfect, then sell all your goods and give to the poor and come follow me." Good God, if we were to actually do this, all the capitalists, the office-holders, and the entrepreneurs, the whole society in fact, would be almost beggars! We would be sunk if it were not for Christian scholarship! Praise be to everyone who works to consolidate the reputation of Christian scholarship, which helps restrain the New Testament, this confounded book which would one, two, three, run us all down if it got loose (that is, if Christian scholarship did not restrain it).

It is true that we Protestants go to great efforts so that every person can have the Bible – even in their own tongue. Ah, but what efforts we take to impress upon everyone that it can be understood only through Christian scholarship! This is our current situation.

What I have tried to show here is easily stated: I have wanted to make people aware and admit that I find the New Testament very easy to understand, but thus far I have found it tremendously difficult to act literally upon what it so plainly says. I perhaps could take another direction and invent a new kind of scholarship, bringing forth yet one more commentary, but I am much more satisfied with what I have done – made a confession about myself.

[Excerpt from [Provocations: Spiritual Writings of Kierkegaard](#), Chapter 56, *Killing the Commentators!* edited by Charles E. Moore, [Plough Publishing](#), Used with permission.]

Approaching the Scriptures with Wrong Questions or a Wrong Point of View

by J.I. Packer

It is very important that one approaches Scripture as the word of God, not just a mixed bag of human religious reflections and testimonies, some of which are likely to be more right-minded, some less, so that our main job is to pick out which are which. This is very inhibiting to fruitful dealing with the Scriptures.

Trust or mistrust?

As I look around I see a broad division between people whose attitude to the Bible is in general one of trust, because they take the Bible as coming from God, and those whose attitude is fundamentally one of mistrust, because they see it only as a very mixed collection of human testimonies.

Some of these latter folk have been stumbled by what they've been given in seminary, because it has been fashionable for the last 100 years in many Protestant seminaries, and for some 40 or 50 years in many Catholic seminaries (Particularly after Vatican II), to highlight the human aspects of Scripture and dwell on differences, real or fancied, between the viewpoint of one writer and another. The effect of this can be to leave students adrift in a sea of pluralistic relativism, with a bewildering sense that the Bible offers a lot of different points of view and who is to say which is right?

All Scripture proceeds from a single source

I am not questioning the value of these studies of the human side of Scripture, but I see a need to balance that in a way that not all seminaries do. I would balance them by saying to all Bible students, in and out of seminary: "Remember, all Scripture proceeds from a single source, a single mind, the mind of God the Holy Spirit, and you have not taken its measure until you can see its divine unity in and underlying its human variety." It is the word of God in the form of human words, giving God's point of view in the form on everything. The unity of Scripture at that level is something that goes far deeper than its surface differences.

Only God can fill our emptiness with an appetite for his word

The biggest thing that keeps us from getting the full benefit of Scripture is simply that we do not feel needy enough. One of the problems of the pastoral role is that it encourages leaders to think that they are full of competence; they have got it made; they know it all. This self-sufficiency is a satanic temptation. A moment of realistic thought will remind us that we are as needy as the next person.

I find it most helpful to remind myself at the beginning of my devotional period [daily time of personal prayer] who God is and what I am. That is to say, I remind myself that God is great, transcendent, that he loves me and he wants to speak to me right now. And I recall that I am the original sinner, the perverse and stupid oaf who misses God's way constantly. I have made any number of mistakes in my life up to this point and will make a lot more today if I don't keep in touch with God, and with Christ, my Lord and savior, as I should.

There is nothing like a sense of hunger to give one an appetite for a meal, and there is nothing like a sense of spiritual emptiness and need to give me an appetite for the word of God. Let that be the theme of our first minute or two of prayer as we come to our devotional times, and then we will be tuned in right. God says, "Open your mouth *wide*, and I will fill it" (Psalm 81:10).

The quantity of theological notions in one's mind, even correct notions, doesn't say anything about one's relationship with God. The fact that one knows a lot of theology doesn't mean that one's relationship with God is right or is going to be right. The two things are quite distinct. As a professional theologian I find it both helpful and needful to focus this truth to myself by saying to myself over and over again, "What a difference there is between knowing notions, even true notions, and knowing God." My times with the Bible, like those of all pastoral leaders, indeed all Christians, are meant to be times for knowing God.

The Inexhaustible Treasure of God's Word

Matthew 13:44, 52-53 (ESV translation)

Aquiring the treasure of God's word – both old and new

⁴⁴ **"The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden** in a field, which a man found and covered up. Then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.

A diligent student of God's word – like a scribe trained for the kingdom of heaven

⁵² And he said to them, "Therefore **every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven** is like a master of a house, who **brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old.**" ⁵³ And when Jesus had finished these parables, he went away from there.

Psalm 1:1-6 (NIV translation)

Walking and delighting in God's word

¹ **Blessed is the one**

who does not walk in step with the wicked
or stand in the way that sinners take
or sit in the company of mockers,

² but **whose delight is in the law of the LORD,
and who meditates on his law day and night.**

³ That person is *like a tree planted by streams of water,
which yields its fruit in season*
and whose leaf does not wither—
whatever they do prospers.

⁴ Not so the wicked!

They are like chaff
that the wind blows away.

⁵ Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment,
nor sinners in the assembly of the righteous.

⁶ For the LORD watches over the way of the righteous,
but the way of the wicked leads to destruction.

Points for prayer and reflection

1. The Lord calls us to treasure all of his word – both the wisdom and teaching of the Old Testament as well as the New Testament Scriptures. Ask the Lord Jesus to put within you a deep love and reverence for the word of God in Scripture. Ask the Lord to open the hidden treasure and meaning (inner spiritual truth) of his word for you.
2. Take a few minutes now to review what the Lord has taught you this past week about the Scriptures. Write down the key truths the Lord has impressed on you about his word in Scripture. Write down the key practical steps the Lord wants you to take and make a regular practice in your approach to the daily reading and study of his word.
3. Read the short reflection, *God's Word Is an Inexhaustible Spring of Life*, written by Ephrem of Edessa (306-373 AD), an early church hymn writer, deacon, and teacher of Scripture. He gives practical wisdom for studying the word of God in Scripture.

The Word of God Is Living and Active – Hebrews 4:12



God's Word is an inexhaustible spring of life

by Ephrem of Edessa (306-373 AD)

Lord, who can comprehend even one of your words? We lose more of it than we grasp, like those who drink from a living spring. For God's word offers different facets according to the capacity of the listener, and the Lord has portrayed his message in many colors, so that whoever gazes upon it can see in it what suits him. Within it he has buried manifold treasures, so that each of us might grow rich in seeking them out.

The word of God is a tree of life that offers us blessed fruit from each of its branches. It is like that rock which was struck open in the wilderness, from which all were offered spiritual drink. As the Apostle says: *They ate spiritual food and they drank spiritual drink* (1 Corinthians 10:3-4).

And so whenever anyone discovers some part of the treasure, he should not think that he has exhausted God's word. Instead he should feel that this is all that he was able to find of the wealth contained in it. Nor should he say that the word is weak and sterile or look down on it simply because this portion was all that he happened to find. But precisely because he could not capture it all he should give thanks for its riches.

Be glad then that you are overwhelmed, and do not be saddened because he has overcome you. A thirsty man is happy when he is drinking, and he is not depressed because he cannot exhaust the spring. So let this spring quench your thirst, and not your thirst the spring. For if you can satisfy your thirst without exhausting the spring, then when you thirst again you can drink from it once more; but if when your thirst is sated the spring is also dried up, then your victory would turn to harm.

Be thankful then for what you have received, and do not be saddened at all that such an abundance still remains. What you have received and attained is your present share, while what is left will be your heritage. For what you could not take at one time because of your weakness, you will be able to grasp at another if you only persevere. So do not foolishly try to drain in one draught what cannot be consumed all at once, and do not cease out of faintheartedness from what you will be able to absorb as time goes on.

A Guide to Discovering the Spiritual Meaning of the Scriptures

by Origen (185-254 AD)

Principle for interpreting Scripture

By what principle ought one to read and interpret the Scriptures? It is a fact that a number of errors have had their origin in an inability to understand a sacred text in the right way.

For example, many Jews have not believed in our Savior, because they have been attached to the literal meaning of the prophecies made about him and have not seen them physically fulfilled. They have not seen the prisoners set free, (Isaiah 61:1) nor the city of God built in the way they imagined it, (Ezekiel 48) nor the chariot cut off from Ephraim, nor the warhorse from Jerusalem, (Zechariah 9:10) nor butter and honey being eaten and the good chosen without prior knowledge of evil or preference for it (Isaiah 7:15).

So then the reason for so many mistaken ideas about God consists solely in the inability to interpret Scripture in a spiritual sense. It has been taken in its literal sense only.

Those who receive the Word, even the most literal-minded, know that some truths revealed in the sacred Books are full of mysteries. Wise and humble people recognize that they cannot explain them. What do we say, for instance, about the prophecies? They are packed full of obscure words. And who has not been struck by the unspeakable mysteries contained in the revelation made to John?

The literal-minded person finds edification in the sacred Books. He finds the bare bones, so to say of the Scriptures. But the person who has made some progress attains to the soul of the Scriptures. The one who is perfect [mature], then, discovers the spiritual law.

The two meanings of the Bible

The reason why the divine power has given us the Scriptures is not solely to present facts according to the literal interpretation of the narrative. If one looks to the letter of the text, some of the facts have not actually happened and would be irrational and illogical.

Granted, the facts that have happened in the literal sense are much more numerous than the facts that have been added and have only a spiritual meaning.

All the same, in the face of certain pages the reader feels embarrassed. Without accurate research it is not possible to discover if a fact that seems historical actually happened according to the literal sense of the words or if it did not happen at all.

By keeping the commandment of the Lord to "search the Scriptures" (John 5:39), one ought to examine with care and attention where the literal meaning is historical and where it is not.

In Scripture not everything is objectively historical in the literal sense. Sometimes it is obvious that the result of taking it literally is impossible. But the **divine Scripture, taken as a whole, has a spiritual meaning.**

These words are the Word of God

The Scriptures that prophesy about Christ, the words that announce his coming and his teaching are inspired by God. They were proclaimed with power and authority and it is for this reason they have conquered so many people's hearts.

However, only with the coming of Christ have the divine character of the prophetic writings and the **spiritual meaning** of the books of the Mosaic Law become apparent. Before Christ it was not possible to produce decisive arguments for the inspiration of the Old Testament. The coming of Jesus persuaded even the doubtful that those pages were written under the influence of grace.

Whoever reads the Prophets carefully will be convinced that they are no human achievement. The reader will understand the meaning of divine inspiration.

As far as the books of the Mosaic Law are concerned, a veil has been drawn between their brightness and people's understanding. The coming of Jesus has made that light shine in such a way that it has become possible to recognize clearly those future benefits at which the literal meaning of those books only hinted. (Cf. 2 Cor. 3:12-18; Heb. 10:1).

It would take a long time to review the ancient prophecies of events that would be realized in the future. But someone in doubt who did this would be struck by their divine character. He would give up all his uncertainty and dedicate himself to the Word of God with all his soul.